“Three Conceptions of Spatial Locality in Chicago School Sociology (and Their Significance Today)”

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Abstract. The development of new spatial methods has heightened long-standing interest in the local organization of urban life. This growth in empirical research has run ahead of theories about the nature of local space: to a large extent, contemporary sociology employs the same conceptions of space developed in works of the Chicago School produced between 1918 and the early 1930's. This article describes three major notions of locality developed by the Chicago School, respectively defined by ecology, institutions, and subjective perceptions. These accounts of locality are not theoretically consistent, and make reference to partially distinct empirical phenomena. A brief survey of contemporary neighborhood research reveals the persistence of these spatial accounts, as well as uncertainty about the goals of neighborhood research. Revisiting the accounts of urban place developed by the Chicago School suggests five distinct ends for research on locality: research programs focusing specifically on ecology, institutions, or perceptions; methodological and theoretical pluralism in pursuit of maximally rich description; and empirical integration seeking to describe the role of multiple processes in the production of local space.

Keywords Chicago school. Ecology. Neighborhoods. Place. Space. Urban sociology

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Introduction

In recent years American urban sociology has placed a growing emphasis on the measurement of social phenomena in local space. Notable lines of research examine residential segregation, access to employment, violence, disease, health, and perceptions of local disorder using a variety of measures. A good deal of this work employs newly-developed methods, many of them drawn from other social sciences, most notably geography (Chan Tack 2014). Logan (2012) provides a valuable overview of the recent spatial turn in sociology. Though the techniques may be new, the theoretical premises of the contemporary sociology of urban space are very similar to those developed by the Chicago School. The present moment is one of great possibility for urban sociology. It is also a moment of uncertainty. This article attempts to clarify goals for contemporary urban sociology by revisiting a major body of previous work.

The Chicago School has been the subject of a number of major historical studies and reevaluations, which have included efforts to provide a straightforward description (Faris 1967), situate the School within a larger disciplinary and institutional context (Bulmer 1986), and define the relevance of the Chicago School for the present (Abbott 1997). These works show a fair degree of consensus about the definition of the School: its major works were produced between the end of World War I and the early 1930's, and its key scholars were faculty and students at the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology. The conceptualization of this group of researchers as a school is warranted by the relative intellectual and institutional coherence of this group, as well as the importance of such intellectual groups in the development of sociology as a discipline (Tiryakian 1979). The definition, of course, should not be maintained too strictly, as this would exclude important intellectual precursors such as Jane Addams (Deegan 1990), as well as the Second Chicago School, which emerged following World War II, but has strong intellectual and institutional ties to the group considered here (Fine 1995). Although this article directs a great deal of attention to material that is unambiguously at the core of the Chicago School, the view of locality advanced here is essentially schematic, and works are discussed as much for their illustrative value as their centrality to the School's historiographically defined core of scholars.

The article begins by examining conceptions of spatial locality in classic works from the Chicago School and related authors, taking note of scholars' attention to three distinct place-

generating processes. These processes respectively correspond to the three conceptual foci that organized the intellectual life of the School: ecology, social organization, and social psychology (Abbott 1999, 6–7). In the next section, I show that these notions of locality, though conducive to rich descriptions of place, do not amount to a general theory, and in fact suggest that the production of a general theory is not possible. I argue that this lack of theoretical synthesis may be explained by the intellectual commitments of this group of scholars. The Chicago School was heavily indebted to the social survey movement, whose task was primarily descriptive, and an overriding purpose of the School is the documentation of the sudden historical transformations wrought by urbanization. In addition, the School's pragmatist roots make a systematic spatial account in many ways unnecessary: theoretical systematicity would have required a significant departure from the city as an empirical object. In short, there is a strong relationship between intellectual commitment and forms of explanation, and the Chicago School presented accounts of space that were successful in light of the implicit intellectual goals for research.

In the final section, I argue that there is a strong analogy between the conceptions of locality employed by the Chicago School and the conceptions employed by urban sociologists today, though this is not necessarily the result of direct intellectual transmission. Though the basic theories of space persist, contemporary research tends to prioritize the measurement of effects over the description of processes. This yields forms of explanation that are decontextualized or employ socially insensitive measures of context. Although there is a large and important body of empirical research on neighborhoods and other forms of urban space, the intellectual goals of this work are not always clear.

The strong conceptual similarities between the Chicago School and contemporary research suggest that revisiting this older body of work may be useful in clarifying the aims of contemporary urban research. A reconsideration of the Chicago School's accounts of space suggests at least five possible overarching goals for the study of neighborhoods today: broad descriptive efforts similar to those of the Chicago School itself; identification and amelioration of undesirable social outcomes; descriptions of neighborhoods as totalities; description of the subjective experience of place; and empirical integration of all three processual accounts. I conclude by discussing some challenges for the integration of these accounts in practice. The claim in this article is not that the Chicago School exhaustively defines the terms of the debate, a genre of argument that has been clichéd for some time (Abbott 1999, 22–3), and certainly

inaccurate in light of the variety of contemporary approaches to urban research (Hunter 2014). Rather, the suggestion is that the history of sociology may be useful in clarifying the direction of sociology today (see Swedberg 2013).

Concepts of Locality in the Chicago School

The classics of the Chicago School are descriptions of places and humans in place. This preoccupation with the empirical particulars of various localities led researchers to develop accounts of social space that best fit the phenomena at hand. Three conceptions of space recur frequently in the Chicago School, often within the same work. The first, and best-known, is the ecological explanation of spatial arrangement, typified by the famous “concentric zone” diagram. Second, researchers often examine institutional space, the set of formal organizations and practices that bound a space and lend it social coherence. Third, researchers examine subjectively-defined communities rooted in shared experience and perception. Though this characterization owes a debt to Owens’ valuable historical treatment of approaches to mapping in the Chicago School (2012), my description is essentially typological.

While there are certain works that offer an unusually clear example of one or another conception of space, most works offer mixed accounts. Some particularly clear presentations of one or another account are listed in Table 1. Sometimes all three notions of locality come into clear alignment, particularly when subjective experience and community institutions are subordinated to larger economic forces. However, there is no necessity for these three accounts to square with one another, and in essence each notion of space stems from a different social process. To an extent, these accounts also make different assumptions about the nature of human subjects and social processes, a matter discussed in A Non-synthetic Account of Space section.

Table 1. Notable accounts of the three concepts of locality

Ecological	Institutional	Perceptual
Burgess, “The Growth of the City”	Drake and Cayton, <i>Black Metropolis</i>	Anderson, <i>The Hobo</i>
Duncan and Duncan, <i>The Negro Population of Chicago</i>	Palmer, <i>The Primary Settlement</i>	Thomas, <i>The Unadjusted Girl</i>
Hawley, <i>Human Ecology</i>	Thrasher, <i>The Gang</i>	Zorbaugh, “Towertown”

Ecological Space

The concentric zone model developed by Burgess (1925a, 51) is perhaps the best-known artifact of the Chicago School, and a strikingly clear example of the thinking underpinning the ecological explanation of spatial locality. This model relies upon two basic assumptions: economic activity is spatially concentrated, and transportation costs (including time) have a significant effect on the value of land at some greater or lesser distance from this locus of production. These costs act as a force, arranging urban populations into zones of people with similar wealth and comparable professional roles. The term “ecology” is a direct borrowing from the biological sciences (see Wortmann 2013); the city, as a social system, was believed to be strongly analogous to both complex natural systems and individual organisms (McKenzie 1925). Owens (2012) offers a persuasive argument that this model derives in part from von Thünen’s “isolated state” model of land use (1966 [1826]). Hawley (1986 [1950]) offers a synthesis of the ecological work of the Chicago School, reducing a great mass of empirical investigation to a handful of economic and geographic principles, which he presents as the general determinants of human spatial organization.

The conceptions of ecology found in von Thünen, Hawley, and the concentric zones diagram all begin by assuming qualitatively undifferentiated space, but in practice the model is adapted to particular features of the social and physical geography of Chicago. These include imposed social restrictions such as segregation of the Black population, major human artifacts such as railroads and the stockyards, and environmental features such as Lake Michigan and the Chicago River. Ecological explanation also involves contextualization in social time. Neighborhood succession, the turnover of a neighborhood from one ethnic, racial, or economic group to another, was a persistent source of investigatory interest. Duncan and Duncan’s (1957) account of the Black population of Chicago is an effort to bring together accounts of neighborhood succession, and Zorbaugh’s (1929) study of the Near North Side examines it at a moment when it is “in transition” (Park 1929, viii), having lost its traditional function during the early-20th century transformation of Chicago’s economy. An ecological account of residential status, along with a quantitative measure thereof, is described in Warner and Srole (1945). Ecological explanation, in practice, is thus sensitive to the particulars of space and time.

By straining the definition, it would be possible to characterize all forms of spatial description in the Chicago School as “ecological,” insofar as contextual effects are present in all local descriptions. Subsequent elaborations of the ecological perspective heighten the possibility for confusion, particularly when there are direct lines of intellectual transmission from the Chicago School. Sociologists have often separated the ecological concept from physical space, treating abstract social spaces as ecologies in which entities compete for finite resources, a perspective that has been used profitably to describe organizations (Hannan and Freeman 1977), professions (Abbott 2005), and many other phenomena. Biological concepts of ecology have also been independently reintroduced to the social sciences in frameworks such as industrial ecology (Erkman 1997).¹ For the sake of conceptual clarity, I refer to ecological explanation only with respect to economic constraints on urban spatial form.

Institutional Space

Though economic forces may generate the coarse form of cities, urban spaces, as inhabited social realities, are substantially organized by institutions. This claim is asserted most forcefully by Park: “Not people, but institutions, are final and decisive in distinguishing the community from other social constellations” (1925b, 115). Institutions are the major organizing force in urban communities because urbanization, on this view, entails the breakdown of older forms of normative control. Rightly or wrongly, this traditional form of social organization was thought to be rooted in inherited value schemes and long, socially complex familiarity with the people in one’s community. The breakdown of social control and consequent disorder of urban space is a theme of central concern in Thomas and Znaniecki’s study of the Polish Peasant (1927), Wirth’s synthetic theory of urbanism (1938), Thrasher’s treatment of gangs (1963), and Shaw and McKay’s account of juvenile delinquency (1969). The breakdown of order is found even in dense ethnic enclaves, in which groups with a similar culture have emigrated from different areas and dwell in short-lived proximity (see Wirth 1928).

On this view, it is the presence of a variety of institutions that lends definition and order to urban communities. Zorbaugh’s (1929) maximalist description of the Near North Side

¹ There are thus at least three important dimensions of variation in ecological explanations in sociology: ecological explanations may differ in their intellectual antecedents, the degree to which they conceive of an ecology as biological or social, and the type of space in which the ecology is situated.

describes many of them: political organizations, gathering places such as cafes and studios, and commercial institutions. Drake and Cayton view churches as particularly important institutions of local organization and control in Chicago's Black community (1945, 399–429). Palmer's study of the primary settlement understands communities to be organized around a set of focal institutions (1932). The division of Chicago into "community areas" may serve as the key illustration of this conception of urban locality—the bounding of Chicago into community areas drew heavily from empirical description of the city, and though some of these boundaries have ecological features, the communities are characterized primarily by shared institutions.

Though the professions and the social division of labor receive regular examination in work of this period, it is notable that the professions do not produce local communities, even when there is high residential clustering among members of a shared occupation. This owes to the highly instrumental nature of relationships within a profession (Zorbaugh 1929, 238–242) and the brittle character of urban economic relationships more generally (Wirth 1938). The distinction is an important one for understanding the institutional account. Institutions produce socially meaningful places, in part, because they realize and concentrate regular patterns of human behavior in space. Perhaps more significantly, these are patterns of behavior driven by shared social ends, overt or latent. This distinguishes the institutional explanation from perceptual explanations, which suppose a shared mentality but do not necessarily suppose shared goals.

Subjective Space

Discussing mentality invites controversy, for the pragmatist and symbolic interactionist features of the School have been contested more hotly than any others. To skirt a debate over the true and proper interpretation of social psychology, I simply observe that there is a recurrent conception of spatial locality that is grounded in perception. In a variety of ways, places are created and sustained by a shared belief in the reality of a place and shared perception of its essential features. Indeed, cities as a distinctive social form are as much defined by a set of beliefs and attitudes as by a particular configuration of space (Wirth 1938). Yet these shared beliefs have practical consequences for action that reinforce the reality of the space: "physical and sentimental distances reinforce each other" (Park 1925a, 10).

The origins and practical consequences of shared belief are not necessarily economic.² Park's conception of "moral regions" hangs on a series of propositions that are basically psychological: individual qualities are socially stylized (40) and legible to others (30). To the extent that individuals will wish to be around people with similar styles of life, and avoid those with certain different styles, individuals can array themselves selectively in physical space on the basis of these qualities (45). The resulting communities are not defined by similar economic or occupational status (43) or by institutions: "the neighborhood exists without formal organization" (7). This holding is echoed in other works, which describe socially ordered places that emerge and persist without institutionalized forms of organization. The weakly-institutionalized social world of Towertown cuts across lines of wealth, social origins, and personal aspirations (Zorbaugh 1929, 87–104), and the anarchic world of Hobohemia coheres primarily on account of a shared perceptual order (Anderson 2006 [1923]).

This perceptual and interactional understanding of locality derives in no small part from the pragmatism of W.I. Thomas. The lengthy discussion of community in *The Unadjusted Girl* (1923) is particularly relevant. Crucially, Thomas understands communities to be products of shared experience, not shared interest—indeed, a self-aware community may nonetheless be divided by serious conflict and find itself incapable of precipitating a common interest from a shared experience.

A Non-synthetic Account of Space

The previous section offered brief sketches of the three distinct accounts of the production of local space put forward by researchers connected to the Chicago School. The presentation of these ecological, institutional, and social psychological accounts emphasized particularly direct assertions of a given view—it is clear that the same authors invoke different concepts across their careers or, at times, within a single work. This section shows that the three accounts do not

² One may of course reasonably note that wealth and social class have been shown, by a variety of means, to affect the composition of residential neighborhoods, and also have considerable effects on stylized individual qualities. The Chicago School's account of social class and its role in the arrangement of local space appears relatively weak in light of the present arrangement of residential space in American cities, though Warner and Lunt do offer a detailed view of the relationship between class-based preferences and residential neighborhood composition (1941: 235). This may be attributed, at least in part, to the significance of ethnic and national origin at the time, as well as the existence at the time of de jure racial segregation, which produced economic heterogeneity in minority neighborhoods that is now less common.

admit of ready synthesis into a single, general theory of locality, nor do they represent an evolving understanding of urban space. Rather, they are a result of the Chicago School's commitment to description over generalization or theoretical synthesis. This in turn, may be understood in part as a product of the intellectual currents that informed the work of Chicago School scholars, a mix of German social theory, pragmatism, and Protestant social reformism. A very similar relationship between commitments and explanation may be found in W.E.B. Du Bois. The claims presented in this section may seem, in some places, obvious and of little consequence: concordance between goals and the pursuit of those goals is to be expected in social science. However, establishing the relationship between goals and theoretical accounts is important for understanding the difficulties of urban sociology today, a matter that is discussed in The Contemporary Situation section.

Inconsistency of the Spatial Accounts

The ecological account differs from the institutional and perceptual accounts in both the kinds of processes described and the purpose of explanation. The narrowly-drawn ecological account presents large and impersonal economic forces as the main determinants of the arrangement of social life in geographic space. Economic forces, too, are defined narrowly: agglomeration is natural, creating costs and opportunity costs that exert constant pressure on urban and regional form. One may debate the extent to which this theory is deterministic, but deterministic or not, this mode of explanation is *impersonal*—it is a “force” in Burgess’ sense, “an abstract cause for events in general” (1925b, 143). Irrespective of the control individuals might exert over their fates in this account, the account says little about the meaning of their exertions.

Aside from its abstract character, the ecological account may yield claims that are quite different from the institutional and psychological accounts, where non-economic social characteristics are far more likely to inform where individuals live and spend their time. These accounts speak to “factors,” in Burgess’ terms (143). Both of these accounts are concerned with the subjective meaning of delimited space for the individuals who live in that space, and both have strongly anti-economistic views of the division of space into socially valid places, as well as the major features that lend or deny internal coherence to place (see Park 1925a, 8). Certainly, professional life and economic hardship appear frequently, but they do so as problems for the

individuals and communities experiencing them, a framing of the issue that is neither deterministic nor programmatic.

The opposition between institutional and subjective accounts of space is less marked. A number of the studies mentioned above treat institutions as focal points that produce and reproduce shared perceptions. But taken in sum, the studies suggest that there is not a strict connection between local spaces organized by institutions and local spaces that are produced by shared perception, though there is generally some relationship between these processes of ordering.³ Institutions can organize a community, or fail to do so—or even actively promote disorder and incoherence, a fact illustrated in Zorbaugh's mapping of the legal fallout from a night club raid (1929, 102). Likewise, places can be clearly defined in the eyes of locals without any institutional forms of ordering. A place may be ordered by institutions, perceptions, both, or neither. In sum, the ecological account intends a different form of explanation than the institutional and perceptual accounts. The institutional and perceptual accounts may sometimes coincide in practice, but are distinct in kind.

The Role of Intellectual Commitments

The absence of a synthetic theory in the Chicago School poses something of a puzzle, as efforts to produce general theories of space are common in the social sciences (to take only recent examples, see Castells 2000; Dear 2002, Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005, and Harvey 2006). The lack of a unified account is not a defect, but provides important insight into the intellectual values of the Chicago School. I argue that the disjunction is based in what scholars understood to be the multiprocessual character of social reality. The recognition of these various processes owes in no small part to the conceptual apparatus available to the Chicago School, which blended German social theory, pragmatism, and reformism.⁴ The meliorist impulse and empirical curiosity undergirding this intellectual stance inclined Chicago scholars to investigate social phenomena of several processually distinct kinds. In turn, the practical commitments of

³ In a narrow sense, an institution is a regular, localized pattern of social behavior, and therefore necessarily exists in the perceptions and recollections of individuals. Defining an institution is a famously slippery problem, one that I hope to set to the side here by appealing to the Chicago School's belief that there was in practice a defensible distinction between institutions and social psychology as such.

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the role of these traditions in 20th Century American social thought, see Joas (1993, 2000).

the scholars made systematic explanation of these processes mostly irrelevant. Two period works may offer suggestive but not definitive evidence for this claim: a work that attempts synthesis of these explanations, and a work that independently reproduces these forms of explanation under similar intellectual conditions.

Work from the Chicago School is typically descriptive to an extreme, at times leaving the underlying intellectual commitments of the scholars uncertain for the reader. Louis Wirth presents a notable exception. His bibliography of work on cities (1925) calls attention to the remarkably heterogeneous scholarship perceived to be relevant to the School's efforts, and more than others, he makes direct mention of important German influences. "Urbanism As a Way of Life" (Wirth 1938) is, in part, an unattributed recapitulation of Simmel's (2002 [1903]) view of city life, but also a notable effort to draw together the work done in Chicago in the previous 20 years. The essay emphasizes economic and ecologic aspects of urban space, such as number and density of inhabitants, but also offers a discussion of the novel and variable institutional forms that organize urban life, as well as the importance of individuation and individual psychology as defining qualities of urbanism. Indeed, urbanism is as much a state of mind as a physical space, and the mentality of cities is, in his view, increasingly the mentality of modernity as such. Yet for all its influence, it cannot be said that this essay lends any more coherence to the phenomenon of urbanism than Park did 13 years before, in no small part because it seems to press the claims of both subjective and structural forms of explanation when these forms of explanation derive from different theories. But it is a valuable illustration: this essay, along with Zorbaugh, offers the strongest example of the fact that efforts at exhaustive accounting, whether descriptive or theoretical, produced a meandering and (on surface) confusing vision of urban places.

The Philadelphia Negro (DuBois 1970 [1899]), rather than any work of the Chicago School, offers the most useful support for this argument, as it independently yields a nearly identical account of space under very similar intellectual conditions. Du Bois, like the key members of the Chicago School, was influenced by both pragmatism and German social theory, having studied with William James and then in Germany. The book is also, in large part, a report on the results of a social survey underwritten by Protestant reformers. Du Bois identifies all three processes at work: an ecological account of neighborhood succession (306); an institutional description of neighborhood organization (296–7), and a variety of social psychological accounts

of community disorder (235–86). Hunter offers a more detailed reading of conceptions of space in *The Philadelphia Negro*, and similarly notes that the work presents a set of “interwoven factors” rather than a synthetic theory (2013: 7).

The presence of all three accounts of space in a single work—especially one that significantly antedates the Chicago School—must call into question the possibility that the accounts represent an evolving theory of urban space, as Owens (2012) suggests. What seems more likely is that different phenomena seemed to demand different varieties of explanation. The clustering of Black residents in a certain ward, their displacement of other populations, and their eventual replacement by new immigrant groups, suggested that economic and vocational factors were most important in explaining the tenancy of Center City slum housing. The high degree of organization of certain strata of the Black community, along with their translation from one spatially concentrated area to another, seemed most explicable by the role of key church institutions in defining and organizing neighborhood populations. Demoralization and rootlessness seem to have much to do with the criminality of the underclass.

The heterogeneous intellectual background of both DuBois and the Chicago School, then, did not so much *induce* the creation of a certain set of theoretical constructions of space as *prime* researchers to notice and record spatial processes at work. Foci of economic production do produce differential costs that concentrate people of similar incomes in similar locales; this patterning is one of the most robust findings in human geography. Institutions do play a major role in the production and reproduction of orderly local communities, and shared habituated perceptions do contribute to the production of socially meaningful places. For the majority of researchers who do not subscribe to a hard materialist or hard constructionist account of the world, it is also apparent that these processes need not proceed in lockstep. On this view, urban space is produced and reproduced by different social processes with varying degrees of personality, temporal duration, historical determination, and institutional definition.⁵ If this multi-processual view is taken seriously, the task of urban sociology is not to provide a general theory of space or make strong, general predictions about the organization of space—the

⁵ The particular set of intellectual conditions described here is not the only way to arrive at this conclusion. Sorokin’s *Social Mobility* offers a contemporaneous elaboration of an account of space that distinguishes social space from “geometrical” or geographic space (1998 [1927]: 3–6). Although this distinction has been cited most often in the context of occupational attainment, Feldman and Tilly (1960) offer a fine example of how it may also be used to characterize place.

variation in local circumstances makes both of these unfeasible. The task is, instead, to describe these processes, or to relate them to social effects that we may take to be important. This appears to be precisely what the Chicago School (and DuBois) did. Though these works may seem meandering to the contemporary sociological sensibility, they succeed on their own intellectual terms. The following section, which deals with current urban sociology, assumes that this multi-processual view about the production of local space is correct. The preceding has not proven this in a strong sense, but provides a basis to think about the present moment as though this belief is true.

The Contemporary Situation

The preceding sections have advanced several claims about theories of urban space in the Chicago School. I have argued that this intellectual grouping identified a number of different processes that organized local space. I have further argued that the interaction between these processes was not conducive to a synthesis or general theory about the nature of local space. The identification of multiple processes, and the absence of synthesis, may both be understood as a result of the intellectual heterogeneity of the Chicago School and its strong commitment to description as opposed to, say, prediction or generalization. That is, the descriptive efforts follow in a meaningful way from the intellectual commitments, and these are broadly concordant with the (often implicit) goals for research. Some may regard this historical presentation as interesting in itself. However, the stated purpose of this article is to explain why the Chicago School's accounts of urban space matter for American urban sociology today.

These accounts matter because urban sociology now confronts problems similar to those of a century ago, and considering the Chicago School's efforts may provide insights about how to proceed. The first part of this section serves to establish the analogy between the past and the present. I begin by showing that the conceptions of locality discussed above persist in urban sociology today. Though I do not claim that there is a direct intellectual lineage, there is certainly a similarity in accounts. I then describe a change in research emphasis: where the Chicago School examined spatial process, contemporary sociology focuses much more on effects, and describes processes less exhaustively. Although novel quantitative methods have made it possible to isolate and measure effects far more precisely, a diminished emphasis on context is

observable in both quantitative and qualitative urban research. These two points, taken together, suggest that contemporary neighborhood research is alert to the complexity of the spatial organization of urban life, but currently proceeds without a clear consensus on the intellectual or normative purpose of studying this organization.

The second part of the section suggests how the Chicago School's accounts of urban space may be useful to the discipline today: the accounts can serve to clarify the connection between intellectual goals and approaches to conceptualizing and studying urban space. The simplest option is for urban sociologists today to make a formal commitment to descriptive pluralism, as the Chicago School did with its implicitly multi-processual account of local space. The multi-processual view could also be adopted explicitly, in which case an important goal would be descriptive and methodological integration of works that tend to focus on one or another of the accounts. In addition, there are scholars who make strong cases for focusing singly on one or another of these processes. Contemporary reinterpretations of the Chicago School pose three other distinct, coherent purposes for the study of local space: social meliorism informed by causal explanation; characterization of places as emergent social phenomena; and subjective description. Each of these alternatives maps roughly onto the three kinds of processes described in Concepts of Locality in the Chicago School section. I conclude by discussing some important issues for sociologists wishing to pursue an integrative multi-processual account.

From Process to Effect

A true survey of scholarship that implicitly or formally invokes the various notions of spatial locality discussed here would run to great length. In place of a full survey, I discuss work appearing in recent volumes of the discipline's three main generalist journals, the *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *Social Forces*. The wealth of material published in these journals is a sign of the continued importance of urban places in the overall project of American sociology. Focusing on major general journals may provide some reassurance that the small portion of the literature considered here has not been selectively chosen to serve my own argument; this work arguably represents a present consensus on what high-quality urban sociology looks like, or at the least, distinguished examples of particular

approaches. Two empirical topics are of evident contemporary interest: residential segregation and neighborhood effects.

The first purpose of this overview is to demonstrate that contemporary sociologists regularly conceive of local space in ways similar to those of the Chicago School. This is not to say that the Chicago School is the intellectual source for these views of locality—indeed, there are good reasons to believe that patterns of historical change in other cities may account for the persistence, or recurrence, of these conceptions. The second aim is to call attention to a shift in the descriptive aims of urban research. To a much greater extent than in the Chicago School, contemporary urban sociology attempts to measure effects rather than characterize processes. This focus provides valuable insight into the importance of social context on various life outcomes, but often at the cost of a deeper understanding of the context itself.

A particularly active line of urban research examines the causes and consequences of race and income segregation in residential location. Wilson (1987) and Massey and Denton (1993) often serve as the theoretical touchstones. In studying this phenomenon, researchers often invoke individual perceptions, ecological constraints, and institutional forms of ordering, the same basic understandings of local space described in *Concepts of Locality* in the Chicago School section.

Current work in this area shows that individual perceptions and preferences play an important but incomplete role in producing observed levels of segregation. Preferences for racial segregation are particularly important in the residential decisions of White Americans, though this is less important for other groups (Crowder, Hall, and Tolnay 2011; Lewis, Emerson, and Klineberg 2011; on racial preferences in gentrification see Hwang and Sampson 2014). Other work does more than substantiate the importance of individual perceptions: it also identifies variation in the scope of space that individuals understand as local, as well as variation in these perceptions according to income or class. The local context for the perception of diversity, for instance, is different in size from the local context for the perception of disorder (Hipp 2007). Perceptions and preferences related to the income of locals may inform residential decisions irrespective of the racial makeup of a local area (Quillian 2012; Sharkey 2014). Income and social class may also go some way in defining how people perceive space, and where they prefer to live (Reardon and Bischoff 2011; Garrido 2013).

Ecological constraints arising from the larger physical and economic structure of cities have also helped to account for patterns of residential segregation in the United States. Individual

preferences for segregation, by themselves, are not enough to explain the high level of segregation in America's urban areas (Bruch 2014). The overall structure of the housing market at the metropolitan level is a significant constraint on mobility for Blacks (Crowder, Hall, and Tolnay 2011), and both segregation and (much rarer) stable integration at the local level derive from much more extensive spatial processes (Crowder, Pais, and South 2012). The spatial scope of residential segregation varies significantly from city-to-city: physical structures and historical factors both matter for the present (Reardon et al. 2008; on historical patterns see Elliott and Frickel 2013). Metropolitan-level economic forces and resources are a major factor in producing community-specific patterns of immigration to the United States (Hamilton and Villareal 2011; de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013).

Sociologists widely regard residential segregation as a problem in itself. However, highly segregated, impoverished neighborhoods may also give rise to other social problems. Current research on these neighborhoods tends particularly toward institutional forms of explanation. Some, such as the degree of "settlement maturity" in immigration neighborhoods directly recalls the Chicago School concept of the primary settlement (for instance, Bachmeier 2013). Social disorganization and institutional scarcity may serve as an explanation for the persistence of concentrated urban poverty (Wacquant 2008). Desmond's research on eviction attempts to explain the structure of highly impoverished, segregated neighborhoods as a combined result of social disorganization (2012a), instability (2012b), and the local institutional structures of civil courts, the police, and patterns of property ownership (Desmond and Valdez 2013).

In addition to serving as a focus for institutionally-oriented descriptions of locality, highly disadvantaged areas have also been an object of particular interest for research on neighborhood effects. Neighborhood effects research seeks to measure how local context affects individual or social outcomes (for an overview see Sampson 2012). Broadly speaking, literature on neighborhood effects may be distinguished between studies that attempt to identify a mechanism or set of mechanisms generating a given effect, and studies that attempt to measure the size of an effect even when the social processes at work are unknown or too complex to describe. Thus, violent crime in neighborhoods may be understood as the result of local population density (Hipp and Russell 2013) or the interaction of social networks in physical places (Papachristos, Hureau, and Braga 2013). Conversely, long-term residence in disadvantaged areas can be shown to have negative effects on individual life outcomes even

when the particular processes at work are not well-understood (Sharkey and Elwert 2011; Wodtke, Harding, and Elwert 2011).

This very compressed overview shows that contemporary urban sociology makes use of conceptions of local places very similar to those found in the work of the Chicago School. Similarly, this work shows a strong awareness of the important role of spatial and historical context in social life. However, this body of research characterizes context rather differently. In some cases, there is an overt commitment to gauging an effect rather than identifying a social process. Various statistical techniques also formalize context in a purely metric way: place becomes spatial extent or uniform environing, social inclusion becomes mathematical embedding, and history becomes elapsed time. At present, this work concentrates on a relatively narrow, though undoubtedly important, range of social outcomes.

This is not intended as another instance of the familiar critique of quantitative methods. The partial sacrifice of context affords an opportunity for measurement and comparison of localized phenomena in a way that was previously impossible. In addition, decontextualization is also common in urban ethnographic research. The strictures of institutional review may dissuade researchers from identifying the places they study, though Katz (2010) offers a very strong case for the value of historical evidence available to ethnographers who identify their sites. The diminished context offered in many urban ethnographies may also owe to adoption of conventions about generalization that are fundamentally unsuited to extended qualitative observation (Small 2009).

Put simply, incomplete theorization of space-generating processes is common in urban sociology, and does not owe to any single theory or disciplinary shift. The study of neighborhoods presses onward despite some conceptual fuzziness about the production of local space. In some respects, this is a favorable sign. It is an indication that the topic is of significant interest, and has played a role in a de-escalation of conflicts over methodology; neighborhood research is at the center of the growing interest in mixed methods, even if there is a widespread perception that such combination of methods presents serious and as-yet unresolved epistemological challenges (Small 2011). It should be noted that the boom in mixed methods is a revival—the Chicago School combined methods routinely, if uncritically.⁶ The relative value of

⁶ This is particularly apparent in the dissertation books considered here, and dissertations and theses produced in the Department through the end of the Second Chicago School (see Platt 1995: 83–85).

studying effects or processes depends upon the aims of neighborhood research. Below, I suggest that there is significant uncertainty about these aims, and a clarification of goals could also yield clearer theories of space and more thoughtful selection of methods.

Returning to Spatial Process: Defining Goals for Urban Sociology

I have suggested that the first Chicago School valued highly contextualized description over the production of generalizable empirical claims or synthetic theories of space. This commitment made sense in light of the intellectual commitments of the School, as well as the urgency of the task of describing an emerging urban society. The same could be said of urban sociology today: sociologists are wrestling with significant changes in urban form and using novel methods to answer questions in ways that were not previously possible. Contemporary research employs concepts of spatial locality that are approximately the same as those used by the Chicago School, but with a host of new methods and a relatively greater emphasis on effects. The subfield continues to expand, and the development of new methods and data sources seems to hold considerable promise. However, the intellectual and practical goals are less clearly defined. We have powerful tools, but no clear consensus about how they ought to be used. Indeed, debates over the methods themselves have often stood in for larger questions.

Rereading the Chicago School can offer a different way to define research goals: investigators can orient their research to particular place-generating processes. Each of the three conceptions of locality discussed in Concepts of Locality in the Chicago School section implies a relatively clear goal for research: (1) description of the way that context affects individual life outcomes; (2) description of places as coherent social entities; and (3) description of the subjective experience of being in a place. Below, I offer brief characterization of these three positions. I then consider two other alternatives: an explicit commitment to pluralism, and an explicit commitment to integrative research.

The most impressive case for the first position is presented in Sampson's *Great American City* (2012), a work that draws together the data and ideas from a long, distinguished career in neighborhood research. Sampson describes Chicago's neighborhoods using techniques from spatial regression to network analysis to ethnographic observation, demonstrating that neighborhoods have major, enduring effects on the people who live within them. The work seeks

to explain how the city and its neighborhoods affect individual lives. Wilson's (2012) preface to the book makes the intention even clearer: the purpose of neighborhood research is to produce mechanistic, causal evidence on the role of context in individual life outcomes, with the aim of devising policy that redresses social ills. Both Wilson and Sampson view this work as a continuation of the project begun by Harvey Zorbaugh. A great deal of neighborhood research implicitly endorses this view.

A second position would take the group or the neighborhood as the object of investigation. Such work would suggest that it is significant to describe, understand, or causally explicate localities without concerning itself specifically with individual outcomes. This aim is central to many of the original works of the Chicago School, which seek to understand groups such as gangs, institutions, or institutional groups such as the primary settlement. For those taking up this attitude, the risk of ecological fallacy is a nonstarter. The latent methodological individualism of neighborhood effects approach would, from this point of view, fail to grasp the irreducibly social character of any place. Though it is certainly not a partisan work in this sense, the study of a religious neighborhood in McRoberts (2003) may be taken as a useful example of a work that attempts to comprehend a locality as a result of complex institutional processes.

A third position, the lyric approach advocated in Abbott (2007), differs from the previous two in that it does not pursue causal explanation, temporal narration, or formal comparison. This approach would study neighborhoods in order to render, for the reader, something of the subjective, emotional reality of the place as experienced by the investigator. Many of the most widely read works of sociology employ something of this approach in an urban setting: classic studies such as Whyte (1943), Gans (1962), and Liebow (1967) have sold hundreds of thousands of copies (see Gans 1997). Zorbaugh serves Abbott as the classic sociological example of this approach (68). Sympathy, the emotion of decisive importance in doing this kind of work, is particularly important to produce stability (and civility) in socially dense and heterogeneous urban space. Another strong statement of this view is found in Anderson (2011), who refers to this investigatory stance as that of "observing participant." Anderson's work also offers an implied argument for the distinction between this form of ethnography and, say, long form journalism: the subjective state required to perform the research is also the state required to behave appropriately in the social spaces he describes, and in this sense, his own perceptions provide a shortened path to a description of social reality. Aside from the value this work may

have for sociology in itself, it is clear that this work arouses the interest of a much larger public, and may be understood as a particularly influential form of public sociology (Gans 2010).

The strong versions of these research programs examine very different phenomena: the measurable effects of local context on individuals, the local context itself, and the investigator's subjective response to local context. These approaches may also imply differences in belief about the character of local space, or the normative purpose of sociology. Focusing on one or another process, however, is not the only possible approach.

Researchers could also formally adopt the descriptive pluralism that the Chicago School implicitly endorsed. On such a view, the aim of urban sociology today would be to describe as many places and processes as possible, with the understanding that the accumulation of knowledge under such a research regime would mean progressive expansion in the things that have been described, rather than progressively stronger general claims about the character of local space. In practice, something like this state of affairs prevails at present: many different sociologists are studying different things, and show a fair degree of tolerance for work that is oriented toward different aims. The conscious pursuit of pluralism would involve a continued methodological détente, and perhaps an expanded view of the social phenomena considered to be of disciplinary interest.

It would also be possible for sociologists today to do better than the Chicago School. I have suggested that the work of the Chicago School implies that a general theory of the production of local space is an unrealistic goal: the processes at work are too heterogeneous. However, a more strongly integrated, multi-processual account of local space may be more readily pursued now than in the past, and though this may not yield a single theory, it could lead to very considerable improvement in empirical description by incorporating more social context. Spatial econometric techniques have already yielded significant refinements in our understanding of the production of local spaces. Two newer families of methods promise still more progress. Egocentric approaches to locality such as activity space measures may offer far more dynamic accounts of how individuals move in and experience spatial context (for an overview see Kwan 2013). Network-based measures of neighborhood found in works such as Grannis (2009) and Hipp, Faris, and Boessen (2012) may serve to provide much stronger formal accounts of the subjective and institutional contexts that define local space. These techniques may lend a social cast to previously impersonal measures of time and distance: these techniques may describe

social interaction or the potential for social interaction far more accurately than simple distance or areal unit measures.

Integration of different processual accounts poses a number of methodological and theoretical challenges. Describing exposure—the sustained effect of individual presence in an environmental or social context—remains a significant difficulty (see Downey 2006). Technically, it is not yet feasible to describe adequately networks of both individuals and social venues in geographic space, or human interaction within and across network domains within a defined place. Formal description of continuous variation within bounded units is another open problem. The unification of different families of quantitative techniques is one class of technical problem. The continued development of an intelligent approach to mixed methods research is another: the virtue of new spatial methods is their greater ability to describe social interaction or the potential for social interaction, but direct ethnographic observation will never be obsolete. To gain the full benefit of these advances, and thereby produce a well-integrated account of different spatial processes, it will be necessary to resist the idea that complex or higher-order spatial processes can simply be reduced to the aggregation of individual behaviors. This temptation may become stronger as egocentric and network techniques become more powerful. Although social reality is ultimately produced by the behaviors of individuals, entities such as neighborhoods and boundaries, once produced, subsist independently from the subjective perception of any given individual living within them (Suttles 1972; Abbott 1995). As the original ecological account of cities suggests, the impersonality of economic forces also does not fit neatly into an individualist mode of explanation.

This section has argued that contemporary urban sociology is vigorous and methodologically innovative, but has also proceeded without a strong, shared vision about the aims of research or the nature of local space. The basic accounts of space offered by the Chicago School persist, either from intellectual inheritance or independent rediscovery. I have shown that urban sociology may proceed from here in several possible directions: it may pursue a specific investigatory goal, embrace pluralism, or seek to integrate multiple processual accounts.

Conclusions

The spatial distribution of social phenomena and the social production of space are topics of persistent and growing interest to urban sociology. Despite this interest, or perhaps because of it, space and locality lack adequate conceptual definition. I have argued that the work of the Chicago School may be of use in clarifying this issue. Work from the Chicago School views the arrangement of local space as the outcome of social processes. Three different kinds of processes—ecological, institutional, and social psychological—produce local spaces. These accounts recur in contemporary forms of sociological explanation.

My reading of the Chicago School and brief treatment of current urban sociology has suggested five possible directions for research on urban space. Three would focus on a specific space-generating process. Two others would acknowledge all of the processes, one pluralistically, and one with an eye toward empirical integration. The argument furnished here does not provide a basis for selecting one over another: that choice is contingent upon researchers' beliefs about the essential purpose and empirical object of sociology. I have not shown what sociology should do, only what a particular group of scholars believed sociology should do. However, I would suggest that the most difficult route—integration—is also the one that fits most readily with the understanding of the discipline and the social world that has the widest currency in the discipline: for most sociologists, it is not hard to believe that the spatial arrangement of social life derives from multiple processes operating with some independence, and it is not unreasonable to pursue stronger explanations now than have been available in the past. Revisiting the history of the discipline does not mean that this work should constrain researchers today. Rather, the lessons of the past may help discover new directions for the future.

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